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CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES

National longitudinal cohort study
of primary schooling in Ireland

CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES: PRESCHOOL TO PRIMARY SCHOOL TRANSITION

REPORT NO. 4

2022

Funded by the National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curraíom agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment





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FOREWORD

This report is the fourth from the *Children's School Lives* longitudinal study. Through its ground-breaking design, this study details the lived experiences of almost 4,000 children in 189 primary schools throughout Ireland. The study aims, across its six years of data-gathering, to learn directly from children and from significant adults in their lives, about their journey from junior infants to sixth class as well as better understanding their transitions into and out of primary school. This particular report spotlights the children's experience as they move from preschool and settle into their junior infant classrooms. In this way, it builds on Report 3, *Children's School Lives in Junior Infants* (2021), and extends our understanding of what it means to be a young child negotiating this important transition in their education journey.

Moving to a new setting is a significant life event for young children and for their families. This move is often characterised as bringing considerable change as children encounter new social, academic, behavioural, and physical contexts. As part of this, the move brings new faces, new relationships and new routines which can generate excitement, a sense of adventure and new beginnings while also bringing, for some children, anxiety and feelings of loss. Effective transitions coupled with curriculum continuity between the two settings, can make a positive, lasting contribution to young children's wellbeing and learning as they settle into and develop a sense of belonging in junior infants. The importance of this is reflected in NCCA's *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (2020) which promotes curriculum continuity through play and playful learning as children journey from preschool to primary school.

Findings from this new report confirm a positive experience for the majority of children as they start primary school. As we saw in Report 3, the importance of warm, welcoming and engaging relationships with their teachers is highlighted by the children and their families. Relationships between the professionals working in the two settings—preschools and primary schools—also emerge as being central to children's positive transitions as do strategies for sharing information about school with parents of the new junior infant children. While progress is being made in forging these critical connections, much remains to be done. This highlights further the importance of information-sharing resources such as NCCA's *Mo Scéal* templates and the need for national initiatives such as those outlined in *First 5*, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families (Government of Ireland, 2019) which facilitate the two professions coming together for dialogue and information-sharing to better support young children at this time in their lives.

As noted in previous reports from this longitudinal research, the study would not be possible without the deep, unwavering commitment of the schools and families who, year after year, give their time generously as they share insights and perspectives. The findings continue to be significant and timely feeding into NCCA's redevelopment of the primary curriculum. This curriculum work takes place

against a backdrop of most children spending time in preschool prior to primary school which, in turn, necessitates careful attention to curriculum and pedagogical continuity so that all children can experience appropriately rich, playful and challenging learning experiences across the two settings. The NCCA also thanks the UCD Research Team led by Professor Dympna Devine, Associate Professor Jennifer Symonds, Assistant Professor Seaneen Sloan and Assistant Professor Gabriela Martinez Sainz. Their research design and innovative methodologies have yielded rich insights into children's experience of this key transition in their education.

Arlene Forster
Chief Executive, NCCA



NCCA

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Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
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OVERVIEW

Children’s School Lives (CSL) is a mixed-methods, longitudinal study of primary schooling in Ireland, which began in 2019 following commission by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The research team at the School of Education, University College Dublin (UCD) is following two cohorts of children as they journey through from preschool through the first half of primary school (Cohort A), and from the middle of primary school through to secondary school (Cohort B).

This is the fourth report from the study. Baseline profiles of schools and participants in each cohort were presented in Report 1 (Cohort B; Devine et al., 2020) and Report 3 (Cohort A; Sloan et al., 2021), while Report 2 focused on participant experiences of remote teaching and learning during the March to May 2020 period of the Covid-19 pandemic (Symonds et al., 2020).

This report is focused on the transition from preschool to primary school. School transitions are one of six core thematic areas that CSL focuses on. The transition into primary school is a significant event not only in the lives of the children, but also their family. It is embedded in wider dynamics related to the personal, social, and cultural context of their lives, as well as the particular trajectory of children’s own emotional and cognitive development (NCCA, 2018). The focus of this report is to present some of the patterns evident in this key transition point from a range of perspectives. As such, the findings presented in this report draw on data generated with the CSL cohort in Junior Infants, as well as an additional sub-study (the ‘Preschool study’), undertaken in the summer term 2019 to explore the perspectives of parents, children and early years educators on the transition to primary school.

Children’s School Lives - Methods

The two cohorts participating in CSL represent the early and later phases of primary school. Cohort A captures the early years of primary school (Junior Infants to 2nd class). Data collection with this cohort began in Autumn 2019, in 85 schools where participating children had just started in Junior Infants. The study will continue to follow these children until 2023. Cohort B represents the second half of primary school (2nd class to 6th class). Data collection with this cohort began in spring 2019, in 100 schools where participating children were in the final term of 2nd class. This cohort will be followed until they transition to secondary education in 2023-24. The timeline of data collection for both cohorts is summarised in Table 1.

TABLE 1 COHORT TIMELINE

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Cohort A	Preschool	Junior Infants	Senior Infants	1st Class	2nd Class	-
Cohort B	2nd Class	3rd Class	4th Class	5th Class	6th Class	1st Year

Within both cohorts, qualitative and quantitative data collection methods are used to generate data rich in breadth and depth. The quantitative element of the study is referred to as the National Study, and it involves annual administration of structured questionnaires with children, their parents and class teachers, and school principals, in the full sample of schools. A sub-sample of these schools also participate as case study schools, where further, in-depth qualitative data are collected annually through classroom observations and interviews with children, teachers, parents, and principals over an

¹ The six thematic areas are: school and teaching cultures; equality, voice and inclusion; wellbeing; engagement; learning outcomes; and school transitions.

intensive immersion period of 1-2 weeks in each school. This element of data collection is referred to as the Case Study.

This report draws on data generated through the Preschool Study, the National Study and the Case Study. The participant groups involved in each element, and the methods of data collection used, are described below and summarised in Table 2.

Preschool Study

In March 2019, schools who had been recruited to participate in Cohort A of the main CSL study were contacted and asked to nominate the main preschool services that their incoming Junior Infants cohort typically attend. Approximately 400 preschools were nominated, and in June 2019, email invitations were sent to each nominated service, requesting participation of preschool staff in an online survey. The preschool manager was also asked to distribute an invitation to complete the survey to parents of preschool children in the setting.

For five of the Cohort A case study schools, one of the nominated preschools was selected for further, qualitative work. The selected preschools were chosen in order to ensure representation of different service types (three were private and two were community-based), proximity to the primary school (two on-site and three off-site) and language (four English-speaking and one naíonra (Irish-medium)).

In May 2019, an email was sent for the attention of the manager of each selected preschool with an invitation to participate in the study. One week later, a telephone call was made to the manager in order to explain the study in full, answer any questions and secure initial agreement to participate. All five services approached agreed to participate. Information and consent forms for parents of preschool children were sent to the preschool manager to pass on to parents, and these were collected by the researcher when they visited the service for data collection.

Each case study preschool was visited over two consecutive days. Given the very young age of the children, the first day was spent observing and taking part in some of the usual activities, to build some rapport and familiarity with the children. On the second day, interviews were carried out with children, usually in pairs. The total number of children interviewed per setting varied from 2 to 20, depending on the numbers of children with parental consent who were willing to participate.

Research activities with the children typically involved the following:

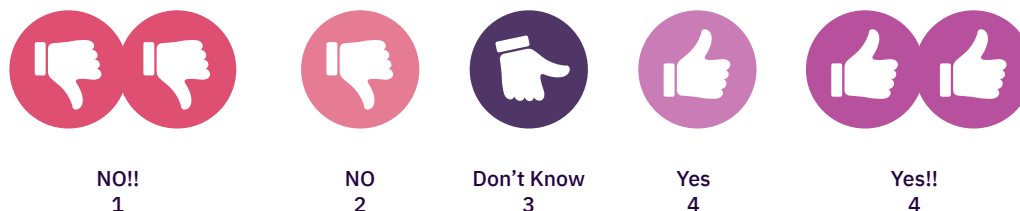
- tour of the preschool and photographs: children were asked to take the researcher on a tour of the preschool. They were given single-use disposable cameras to take photographs of their main activities, what they liked, disliked, etc.
- discussion about transition: children were invited to talk about what they thought of moving to their new school. They talked about whether they knew anyone at the school, whether they had visited the school and met any of the new teachers, and what they thought they would do in their new school. They were asked to draw pictures of what they thought their new school, classroom and teacher would look like.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a selection of staff and parents in each setting. Interviews focused on experiences in the preschool setting, links between the preschool and primary schools, preparation for transition, beliefs about the skills/dispositions that support a successful transition, and any challenges faced before, during or after the transition phase.

National Study

The National Study data collection involved administration of a structured questionnaire with children in Junior Infants by trained field researchers who visited each of the 85 participating Cohort A schools in October to November 2019. With the young age of the children in mind, the questionnaire was brief, with nine items intended to capture their feelings about school. Questions were read aloud to the children, who responded on a 5-point scale represented by a series of pictures (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Response scale used in questionnaire with children in junior infants



Teachers of Junior Infant classes completed a questionnaire on their own characteristics, core features of their class, school transition activities, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Teachers were also asked to complete a short rating scale for each participating child in their class, reporting on how they had settled into primary school. This was administered in May 2020 and teachers were asked to reflect on the period January to March 2020, prior to the first school closure period of the Covid-19 pandemic.

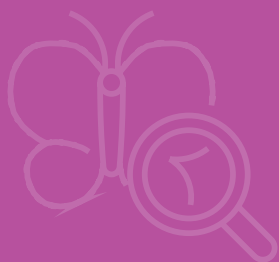
Parents who provided an email address were invited to complete an online questionnaire that covered family characteristics, the home learning environment, children's preschool attendance, and their experiences of the transition to primary school.

Case Study

The case study methods are designed to provide insights into the everyday incidents, experiences, and social relations that children engage in as they transition through primary school. CSL researchers spent up to 10 days in each of the six Cohort A case study schools. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with parents, teachers of Junior Infants, and school principals, and focus groups were undertaken with children in Junior Infants in the case study classes. Interviews covered a range of themes in keeping with the broad focus of the study, and for the purpose of this report, emphasis was placed on the discussion around school transition.

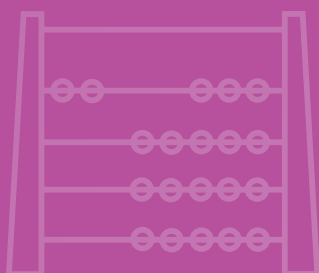
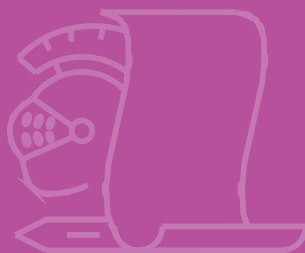
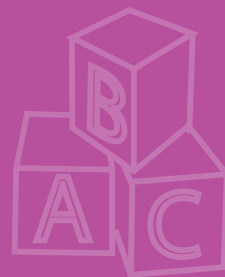
TABLE 2 SUMMARY OF DATA COLLECTION

Participant group	Data collection	Timing of data collection
Early years educators	Self-completion online questionnaire Semi-structured interviews	April 2019 May – June 2019
Parents of preschool children	Self-completion online questionnaire Semi-structured interviews	April 2019 May – June 2019
Preschool children	Participatory methods	May – June 2019
Children in Junior Infants	Structured questionnaire; 1-1 administration Focus groups	October – November 2019 October – November 2019
Teachers of Junior Infants	Self-completion online or paper-based questionnaire Brief teacher-on-child questionnaire (transition) Semi-structured interviews	October – November 2019 May 2020 October – November 2019
School principals	Semi-structured interviews	October – November 2019
Parents of children in Junior Infants	Self-completion online questionnaire Semi-structured interviews	October – November 2019 October – November 2019



KEY FINDINGS:

PRESCHOOL



$$\begin{array}{c} 4 \times 4 \\ 8 - 3 \end{array}$$



Preschool Attendance

- Almost all parents (99%) of children in Junior Infants classes reported that their child had attended an early years setting prior to starting primary school, with children attending for an average of 20 hours per week.
- The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme provides two free years of preschool education for children up to the age of 5 years and 6 months . Almost all parents of children in Junior Infants classes (94%) had accessed the ECCE programme.

Parents interviewed spoke of the value of attending preschool for their child, and highlighted opportunities to spend time in the preschool and speak with the staff. Interview data also hinted at parental expectations for primary school and the role of preschool in preparing their children for that, for example, by learning to 'sit still'. Despite this, the same parent refers to the importance of play in preschool:

“

'Well, I think when your child is in [preschool], you get to go into the classroom every single day. And you speak to the teacher, if not more than one teacher, every day. And you get to meet their friends and talk, certainly in [my child's preschool] you can go in, sit down, read a book with them... It was lovely, and it was very open.'

(Preschool 3, parent)

”

“

'... but they [preschool staff] are so nice, and [my children] they love going to [preschool] and just going in. Grand, they go in, they learn... I suppose it teaches them, they're teaching them to sit still at the preschool, when they're in a creche so they're not kind of running around. They're kind of preparing them for school... It teaches them to play and learn.'

(Preschool 2, parent)

”

Early years educators interviewed spoke of how the activities in preschool supported children's development and practical life skills with a view to preparing them for the expectations of primary school.

“

'you want to get ...the holistic development of the child... the academics is second, but it works alongside their development. So they come in and you're doing [activities] from the very basic pouring, spooning, button frames to get their dexterity and their eye hand coordination...so that's what we call practical life – looking after themselves, looking after the environment.'

(Preschool 3, manager)

”

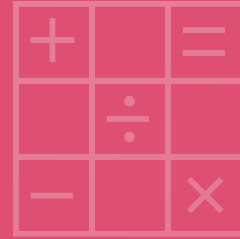
“

'So, early education now is all about giving the child a voice, it's working from the child's best abilities... But as you're coming up to transition time, you're kind of going, okay, sometimes the child has to fall in with what the group needs to do, so you're building on things like that, so it's more group orientated and they're more following what needs to be done.'

(Preschool 4, deputy manager)

”

² The ECCE scheme is available to all children who have turned 2 years and 8 months on or before 31st August, as long as they will not turn 5 years and 6 months on or before 30th June of the year he/she is moving to primary school.



KEY FINDINGS:

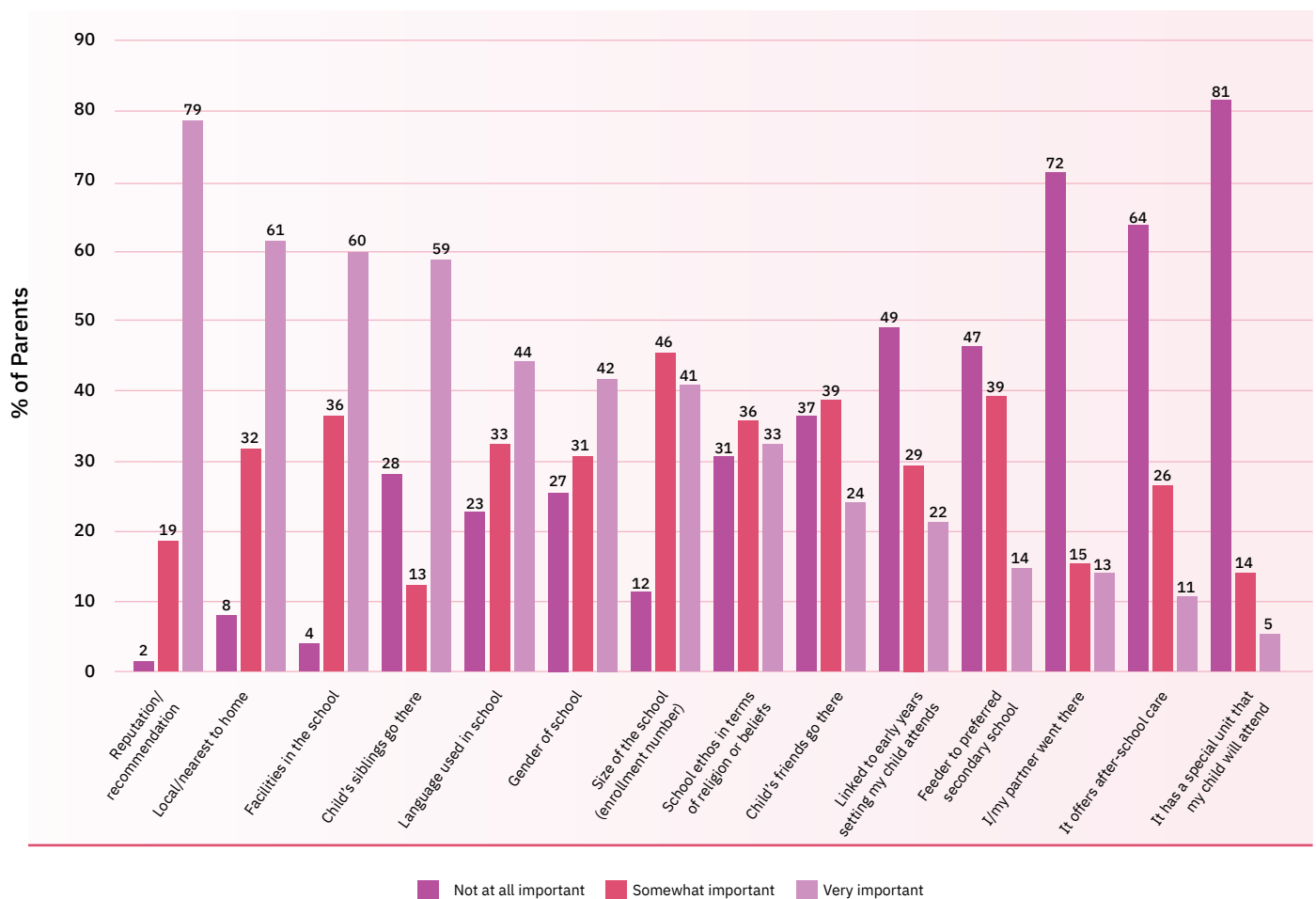
SCHOOL CHOICE



School choice

- The most important factor in primary school choice for parents appeared to be schools' reputation or having a recommendation, 79% of parents reported that this factor was very important in their school choice, and a further 19% reported that it was somewhat important (Figure 2).
- The school being local/close to home was very important for 61% of parents and somewhat important for 32%.
- Similarly, issues related to school facilities was rated as very important by 60% of parents, while the language of instruction was noted as very important by 44%.
- About a quarter of parents (24%) said that their child's friendships were a very important factor in school choice; for just over a third of parents (37%), their child's friendships were not at all important.
- Parents were almost equally split on the importance of school ethos, however this may reflect the limited options available to parents, given 90% of primary schools in Ireland are under Catholic patronage.

Figure 2 Parent rating of importance of factors for primary school choice¹



¹ Some categories do not add up to exactly 100 due to rounding

Interviews with parents confirmed the importance they placed on the reputation of the school among their family and within the community in making their choice to send their child there. This also included levels of supports and facilities available. Parents also choose schools that were near their home or workplace and particularly if siblings attended and were happy there.

“

‘Well, ... my (relative) recommended this school. We’re only local as well, but I heard loads of great things from other people that attended this school. So, I just thought it was a good choice ...’

(Parent, DEIS, Girls, Urban)

”

“

‘Yeah and when I listen to my friends talk about their kids and.... they’ve said to me about (study school) that’s a great school. Well, put it this way, I brag to my friends about what’s available... it’s the caring side... some of the kids have been introduced to play therapy... the breakfast mornings, the parent’s courses...’

(Parent 1, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

“

‘Comparing it to the likes of [city] where I grew up, I think there is an awful lot of involvement in after-school activities for kids here.’

(Parent 2, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”

Complexities over school choice in relation to gender and ethos also emerged in our case study interviews. For one family for example, in spite of some misgivings about the single sex context, they prioritized sending their child to the closest school, while for the second family, it was also guaranteeing access to the girls (Catholic) secondary school which influenced their choice:

“

‘To be honest it’s just 4 metres away... all the girls around here are going to be coming here as well... I probably would have preferred a mixed school but just because I always went to single sex schools and I never thought much about it, but my husband is from [county] and he was in a mixed school and he kind of thought it was really weird.’

(Parent 1, Girls, Urban)

”

“

‘People have told me, other parents I would talk to suggest - regarding secondary school, to start enrolling her now and I am kind of going, she is only junior infants. Personally, I find the whole thing ridiculous, but it is what it is, I suppose.’

(Parent 2, Girls, Urban)

”

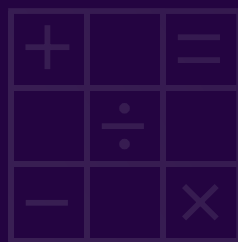
Similarly, thinking ahead to secondary school was noted by this parent who chose to send her child to the local Gaelscoil:

“

‘But I think it is great that by the time she goes to secondary school, she will have a good bit of Irish... maybe it is an extra subject that she won’t have to worry about too and she may be able to focus on other things as well, going forward.’

(Parent 2, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”



KEY FINDINGS:

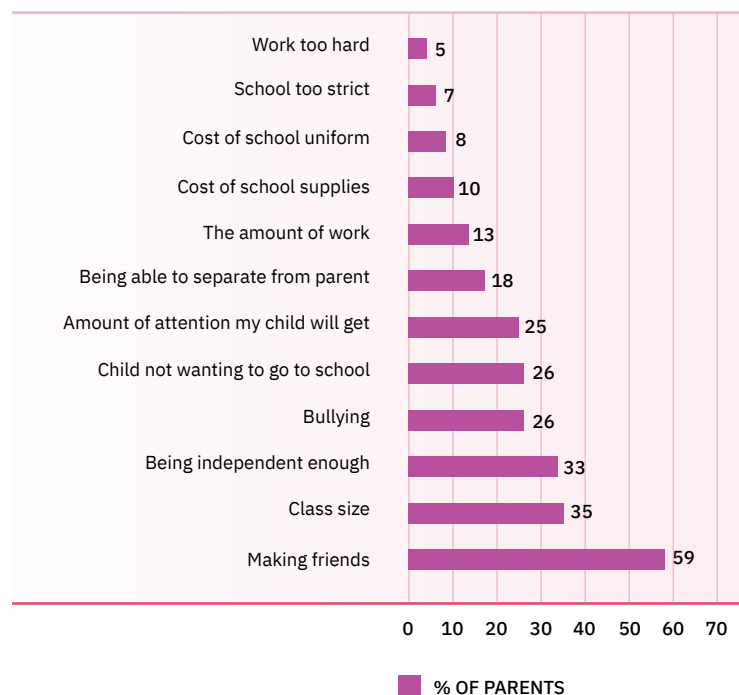
PARENT CONCERNS ABOUT STARTING SCHOOL



Parent concerns about starting school

- Parents were asked about any concerns they had about their child starting primary school (Figure 3). The main concern, selected by 59% of parents, was that their children would make friends. In contrast, having friends already at the school was rated as lower priority by parents in their school choice (see Figure 2). Here we are evidencing parents' concern about their child's ability to make friends, which would include new friends at a school where they might not know everyone already.
- Class size and their child's level of independence was a concern for just over a third of parents.
- Bullying and school avoidance were concerns for just over a quarter of parents, as was uncertainty over the level of individual attention their child would get in the (typically) larger junior infant class setting.

Figure 3 Parent concerns about starting primary school



Interviews with parents highlighted their main priority that their children would be happy in school and develop social and emotional skills:

“

‘My hopes? Just that she’s happy. That’s the number one priority. Yeah, I don’t mind what her grades are like or ..., if she takes longer to learn certain things that’s okay.’

(Parent 2, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

“

‘Social skills ... I think that is the main thing that they have to learn when they are starting because they will learn the rest.... So, to learn resilience and to be able to manage those frustrations. There is a lot to learn that is not academic and that will help you through your life.’

(Parent 1, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

While the transition to primary school was invariably spoken about in positive terms, uncertainties of being able to help their children as they progressed through school, to worries about bullying were also noted:

“

‘I suppose the worries definitely, with the whole, I suppose, bullying thing that is going on. That is probably one of my biggest worries that if he would ever be bullied... There is so much about it on social media and all that and I suppose, in years to come, that is definitely a worry.’

(Parent 1, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”



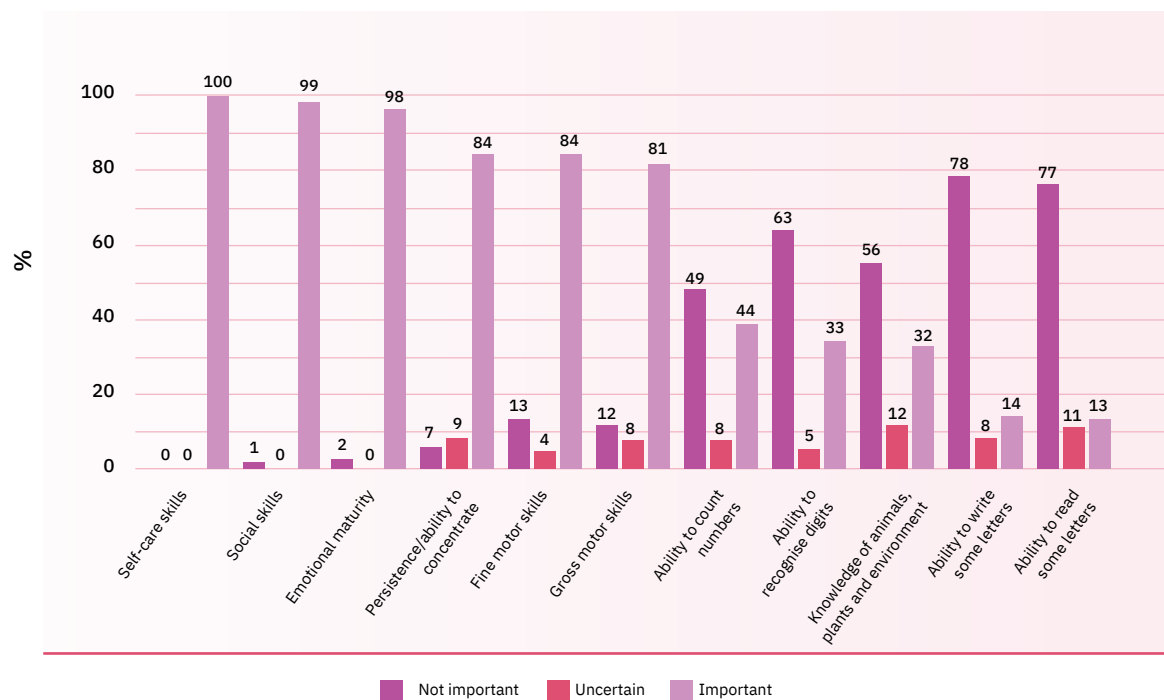
KEY FINDINGS:

ATTRIBUTES AND SKILLS TO SUPPORT TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL TO PRIMARY SCHOOL

Attributes and skills to support transition from preschool to primary school

- Teachers were asked to rate a number of attributes and skills in relation to their importance for children starting school (Figure 4).
- Social, emotional and self-care skills were rated as most important (ranging from 98-100% of teachers)
- Motor skills and ability to concentrate were rated as important by over 80% of teachers.
- Opinions were mixed in relation to pre-academic skills. Almost half of teachers (44%) believed it was important for children to be able to count on school entry, while a further 49% felt this was unimportant. Thirty-three per cent felt it was important for children to be able to recognise digits.
- The majority of teachers felt it was unimportant for children to start school being able to read some letters (77%) or write some letters (78%).

Figure 4 Teacher rating of skills and competencies for starting school¹



¹ Some categories do not add up to exactly 100 due to rounding

Interviews in the case study schools highlighted the importance both teachers and parents placed on preschool experiences in facilitating positive transitions to junior infants. Evident however were variations in the experiences within preschool settings in terms of how children were prepared. Teachers especially emphasised the importance of practical and social skills that helped children settle into school routines:

“

‘I think they were very prepared from playschool; you know. I think there is a huge difference from playschool to playschool, and in terms of the work that was done there and the preparation...some playschools have the children better prepared than others, you know.’

(Teacher, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”

“

‘If they’ve been in preschool, you’ll notice they know they have to wait their turn, they have to put up their hand. And their concentration will be that bit longer if they have been to preschool hopefully.’

(Teacher, Girls, Urban)

”

“

‘So, some people say, would you prefer your kids to come into school knowing how to count or would you prefer them to come in and be able to self-regulate a little bit or problem solve. I would prefer the social skills, [rather] than the academic. I think you learn academics in school.’

(Teacher, DEIS, Boys, Urban)

”

For parents, any concerns or worries they had related to the level of ‘step up’ required and a perceived big jump in terms of learning. Their narratives point to some mismatch in expectations between teachers and parents, especially in terms of the skills and competencies expected of children on entering junior infants. It is also noteworthy the distinction parents draw between play and learning, the latter more readily identified with primary school:

“

‘... It is a drastic change, going from playschool and playing and everything, and then straight into learning and stuff.’

(Parent, DEIS, Girls, Urban)

”

“

'It is harder because it was all play in the Naíonra. It is totally different to come to school. They have to sit down in chairs and settle and ... having to get to know a larger group as well. It is a bit daunting.'

(Parent 1, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”

“

'I feel that when she went to Montessori it prepared her for school as she had done a lot of the basics. She was able to read, hold a pen, write with a pencil. She could do all those things. They adjust so well. They mix better and learn better.'

(Grandparent, DEIS, Girls, Urban)

”

These comments, taken together with the earlier reference by a parent to learning to 'sit still' in preschool, suggests that a variety of pedagogical approaches are being used in preschool, and that there are a range of attitudes among parents. Further, there is a notable contrast with the earlier findings that self-care and social skills are rated by primary teachers as the priority for skills development for children starting school. This suggests that there may be a mismatch, in terms of expectations of families and schools, around school readiness and the attributes that are important for the transition to primary school.



KEY FINDINGS:

TRANSITION ACTIVITIES

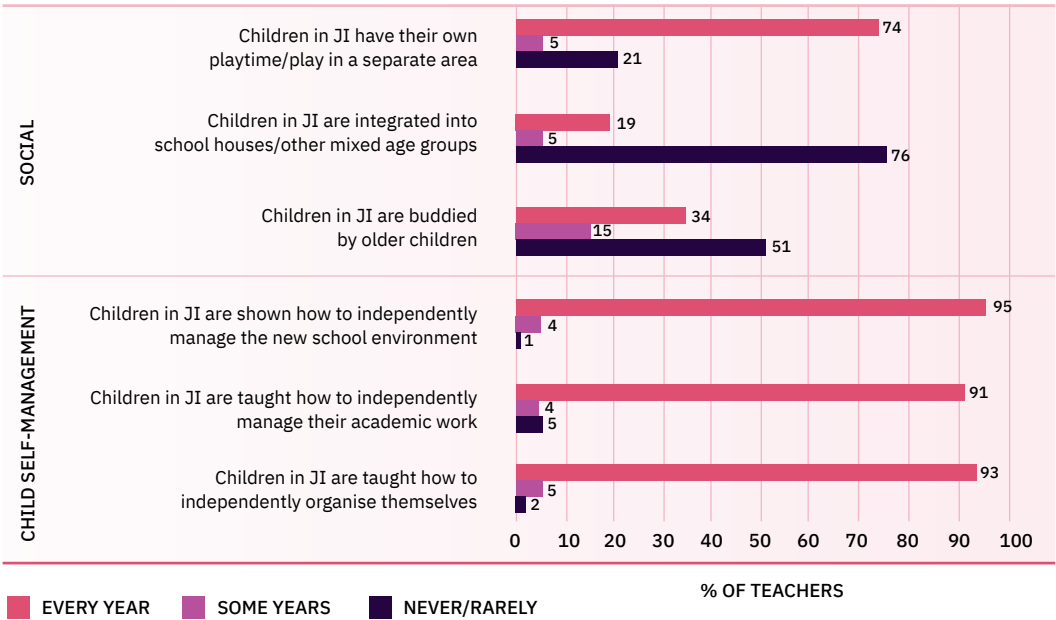
Transition activities

The ‘Five Bridges of Transition’ (administrative, curriculum, pedagogical, child self-management and social) were used as a framework for collecting information from teachers on activities to support the transition from preschool to primary school. In this study we added items to capture home-school partnership to create a sixth bridge of relevance for the preschool to primary school transition.

Self-management and social bridges

The most used transition practices were those under the child self-management bridge, which involved supporting children to independently manage the new school environment, organise themselves and manage their school work. Almost all teachers (ranging from 91-95%) reported that children in Junior Infants were taught to manage their new environment, academic work and to organise themselves (Figure 5).

Figure 5 School transition practices (social and child self-management bridges)



In school, highly organised classrooms; routines to familiarise children with the structure of their day; and encouraging friendships were identified as transition activities that helped children in Junior Infants manage themselves in the new school setting. Some comments also highlighted the importance of transition activities that take place prior to starting Junior Infants, to help familiarise children and parents with the primary school day.

“

‘I really think the structure and organisation, especially in an infant classroom, is really important for them. I think a lot of time at the start of the year, things they are unsure of is because they don’t know how the day is going to look.’

(Teacher, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

“

‘They enjoy routine and structure, I think that’s really important with the younger children, just the structure of the day.’

(Teacher 1, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

”

Clarity over routines and getting to meet the teacher, were all noted as important by parents in helping their child settle in:

“

‘He was excited to wear his uniform. ... Because he sees his brother, he is always wearing uniform, and then go to, ‘Oh, I’ll be in the big class’, and it’s excitement. More excitement at the time. Happy and he comes home smiling.’

(Parent 2, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

“

‘I thought it was going to be a lot more traumatic because everyone was making it such a big deal and for the whole summer I was like, ‘Oh are you ready for school?’ And we got the bag and we got the lunchbox and we got the uniform. And there was no tears the first day, no tears the second day, so I was like it’ll just be like week three it’ll all dawn on her and she’s going to hate going in. But no, she literally went in, looked around and was grand.’

(Parent 2, Girls, Urban)

”

There was also support for children’s social integration into the school through different forms of classroom organisation:

“

‘I do the ‘friendly fours’...I match them up with four different people every week and it’s just that they get to know everyone.’

(Teacher, Girls, Urban)

”

Curricular and pedagogical bridges

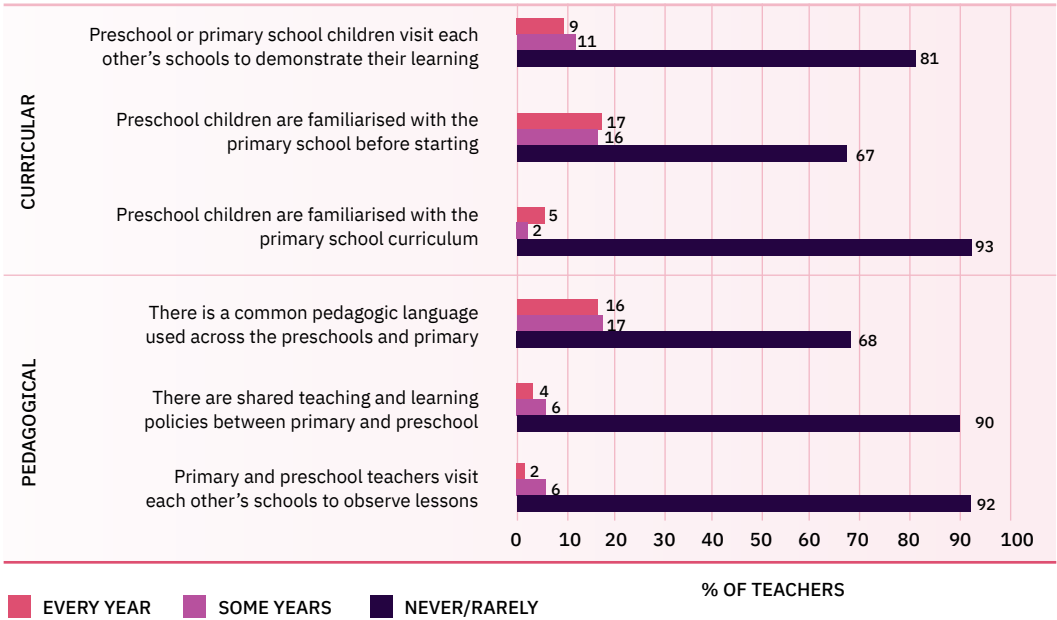
Research on best practice for school transitions highlights the importance of teachers/educators across sectors familiarising themselves with practices in each setting. It was of interest to the CSL team to document whether any of these activities were occurring at the preschool to primary school transition, in an attempt to map current practices and identify potential areas for development.

Findings highlight little evidence of a curricular and pedagogical bridge between preschools and primary schools (Figure 6). The most frequently used curricular bridge reported by primary teachers was where preschool children were familiarised with the primary school before starting. Just under fifth (17%) of teachers of Junior Infants reported that that this happened in their school every year. Case study data indicated that this was generally in the form of a visit to the primary school where children would see their new classroom, the playground and meet some of the staff.

Questionnaire responses from early years educators indicated some collaboration between preschools and primary schools when it came to familiarising children with the primary school; 24% stated that their setting took preschool children to visit their new primary school, while 31% reported that primary school staff visited the children in the preschool setting.

Few teachers reported preschool and primary teachers attending each other’s lessons (92% of teachers reported that this never happens) or sharing teaching and learning policies between the two sectors (90% reported that this never happens). It was apparent that where primary teachers and early years educators visited each other’s classrooms, it was with the aim of building relationships with the children rather than sharing information about teaching and learning. This reflects the absence of a culture around sharing pedagogical practices between sectors in the Irish context.

Figure 6 School transition practices (curricular and pedagogical bridges)



Interviews with early years educators highlighted a mixture of experiences when it came to collaboration between the preschool and primary schools. In some cases, this extended to use of the primary school grounds and invitations to celebratory events.

“

‘...we have a very close relationship with the boy’s school... we’d go up to the boy’s school for maybe, there’s a garden, we’d walk around the garden, we’d go see their school plays at Christmas time.’

(Preschool 3, manager)

”

However, it was evident that there was variation in experiences amongst early years educators in relation to connections with primary schools. One early years educator commented that while their setting fed into eight primary schools, they had a close connection with only one of these schools:

“

‘that school over there is very aware of us and where we are, and they’ve come and visited us, and they’ve seen [our practice]. Other schools, perhaps maybe if they visited us, they’d see what goes on in early ed, and how to connect that in. Particularly as Aistear and things like that, how it’s been brought into the primary sector now. Aistear has been going on with us for a long time’

(Preschool 2, educator)

”

There was evidence of perceived curricular discontinuity in the expectations for children’s learning at preschool and primary school:

“

‘I think when it comes to the academics, I mean they’re quite advanced in here and then I think they start... I’m not sure how it works, but I think they kind of take a few steps back when they go to primary at the very beginning. You know I’ve heard in Junior Infants they only go to one to five in their numbers.’

(Preschool 3, manager)

”

Home-school and administrative bridges

The administrative bridge includes providing information about the primary school to parents of incoming children, meetings between preschool and primary school staff to plan and discuss transition arrangements and sharing of reports on individual children between the preschool and primary school.

Our findings identify that there was relatively little transfer of information about children between preschools and primary schools. Although over half of early years educators (54%) said that they write reports on individual children to pass to the primary school, only just over a quarter of primary school teachers (26%) reported receiving information on the children from preschools, with a further 22% reporting that this happens ‘some years’ (Figure 7).

In comparison, schools were much more active in communicating with parents about the transition. Over three quarters of primary school teachers (78%) reported that they sent information about the school to parents. Of the early years educators surveyed, 19% said that their setting and the primary school organised an event for parents of children preparing to transition to primary school, while 54% reported that they gave parents a book or information pack about starting school.

Other frequently used methods of communicating with parents included using a parent-teacher communication tool (89%), sending home information about the school to parents of incoming children in Junior Infants (78%) and induction events for parents in the primary school (67%).

Teachers recommended giving practical advice to parents to help children with the transition into school, particularly if it is their first child.

“

‘And also, that the parents would have the uniforms tried on them and you know...that they would have all that prep done. That children are familiar with the lunchboxes because you tell parents these things, but the children forget. You know because some of them, even something small like a bottle that doesn’t work properly, or whatever, can throw them [children] hugely, you know.’

(Teacher, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”

Parents in our case study schools appreciated the updates received from the school and the approachability of the class teacher in terms of queries and concerns. Direct contact through a parent information evening or curriculum meeting, rather than extended correspondence was the preferred medium. Parent groups on messenger apps were also mentioned as a good way to know what was happening in the class, although some parents were reluctant to join in at this early stage of their child’s education.

“

‘There’s a class, I think it’s called, [messenger app], I can never remember. If I have any questions or if I have any issues at all I just send (teacher) a message. ...If I need to speak to her, she’d always make time for me. Yeah, she’s very approachable.’

(Parent 1, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

In Junior Infant classes, while there were varied practices across the schools, parents learned how their children were doing at school through helping them with their homework and at parent-teacher meetings held annually in the school.

“

‘Well, I would know through her homework ... The teacher sends out what the homework is for the week and what we have to do. I suppose any correspondence is on that about what they want. I don’t think the teachers can do any more than that.’

(Parent, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”

“

‘I had her parent-teacher meeting about two weeks ago, ...she was like [Study child] settled in so well, ... we were kind of shocked, she just took to it so well, she was fine. So, I was like, that was really good to hear.’

(Parent, DEIS, Girls, Urban)

”

However, there were some concerns about communication, as noted in our parent questionnaire:

“

'An open day in June would have been useful, there was an open night in January, but that was very early. In June when she was preparing to leave preschool, an open day or a visit to the school would have been really useful.'

(Parent questionnaire open commentary)

”

“

'Might have been helpful to receive information about what my child was doing in school, after he started. He often said he didn't know what they did during school, so whilst he wasn't getting homework, it was unclear what was being done.'

(Parent questionnaire open commentary)

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Also in case study data, one parent remarked that:

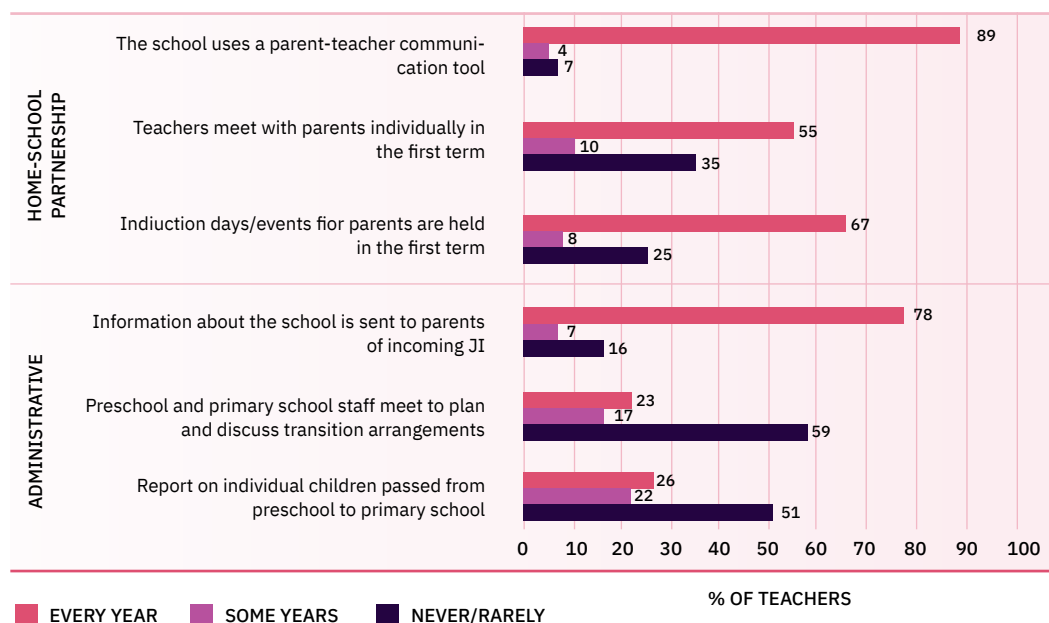
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'... we didn't know her teacher, we didn't even know what her teacher's name was I think until the week beforehand.'

(Parent 1, Girls, Urban)

”

Figure 7 School transition practices (home-school partnership and administrative bridges)



Transitions coordinators

Case study data confirmed the benefits of a dedicated role (e.g. early years co-ordinator) for facilitating the transitions from preschool to primary school. This was evident in one of our case study schools, which had a preschool on site. Key here was facilitating communication around all aspects of the children's needs: social, emotional, and academic, in addition to communication about any additional support needs:

“

'Our early years coordinator, she's a very valuable asset in the school. So, she would... she'd have an annual series of meetings with the coordinator from the [preschool], in the lead up to transition time, where we'd have a full breakdown of every child from the nursery who is going to transition across.'

(Principal, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

“

'I think we're quite lucky that we do have an Early Ed [preschool setting] in the school, because even times during the year where something might crop up. It's handy to be able to go over and say "Did you find last year that maybe this boy struggled with this"? So, we are lucky to have that ... it is really helpful.'

(Teacher, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

This was also reflected in interviews with early years educators. One early years educator commented how they were the person who was contacted by teachers and principals in the primary school for information about incoming children, particularly when the children had additional support needs. This educator referred to how the expansion of the ECCE programme to 2 years meant that they knew the children well by the time they were preparing to start primary school:

“

'They [primary schools] would often contact us with parents' permission again, about how the child is, what works with that child, what might need to be put in place for that child. But we would also have great connections with speech and language therapists, with psychologists, all the early intervention schemes as well. So, they kind of tend to feed in together... And now with the free preschool place going for two years, we really know the children, because it's two years.'

(Preschool 2, educator)

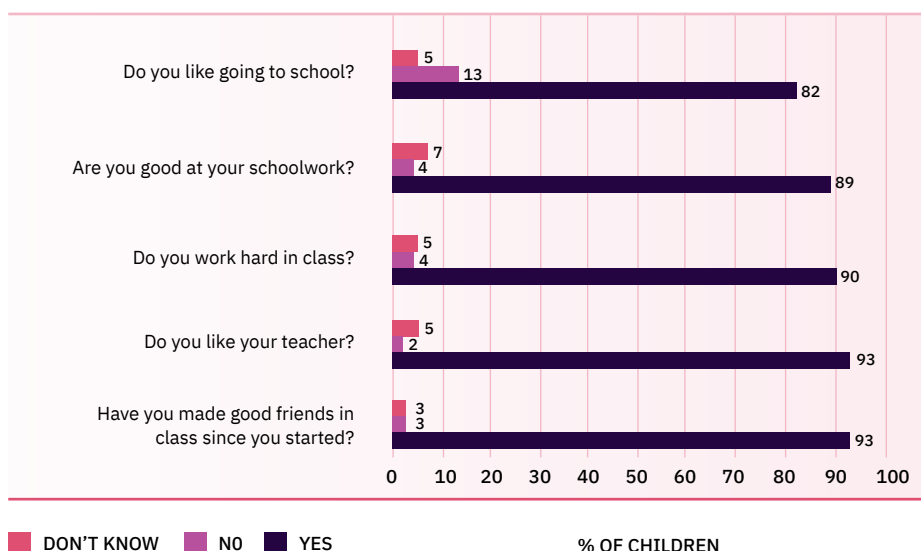
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In summary, the data presented here highlight some areas of very good practice in relation to transition activities. Parents were generally very satisfied with the information they received about the transition, and there is evidence of preschools and primary schools having shared goals in supporting children's social, emotional and self-management skills across the transition. Information sharing between the sectors, about practice and also about individual children, are areas for development.

Children's perceptions of school

As part of the National Study fieldwork, in November 2019 (when children had spent approximately 2-3 months in school), children were asked a short set of questions about how they felt about going to school (Figure 8). Children were generally very positive about school, with 82% saying they liked going to school, 93% liked their teacher and had made good friends in class.

Figure 8 Children's perceptions of school^a



^a Some categories do not add up to exactly 100 due to rounding

Children were also asked about their feelings on their first day at school, and could select the main emotion from a pre-specified list. Almost half of children (46%) reported feeling excited and a further 25% reported feeling happy. Almost a quarter reported feeling nervous, and 6% were bored.

Through the case study data collection in preschools and Junior Infant classes, children made reference to differences between preschool and primary school:

“

Interviewer: Is this school like (preschool)?

Child: No.

Interviewer: In what way is it different?

Child: Because the (preschool) has toy cars in it and this doesn't

(Child, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”

“

Interviewer: What do you think it will be like in when you go to (primary school)?

Child: More tabletop

(Child, Preschool 5)

”

The noted differences reflect children's anticipations of there being more serious 'work' to do at primary school in comparison to preschool. These quotes suggest that children anticipated less playthings (e.g. toys) and more formal learning (tabletop).

Observations of children in Junior Infants highlighted the busyness and energy of the case study classrooms and the variety of experiences children were exposed to in this new environment. The mix of anticipation and curiosity in addition to normal anxiety at something new resolved quickly.

Informal conversations revealed the children's general enthusiasm for 'big school', the positive affirmation of their new status, and the importance of the 'teacher' and new friends to their lives. Case study parents were very observant of the changes:

“

'He is a happy little man. He loves school. Since he started school, he is so happy, making all his little friends ... That is all I hoped for was that he settled'

(Parent 1, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”

“

'Yeah, I think it is just the transition at the start itself was hard for him, but he is in a routine now and he knows this has to be done. He is finding it good. He loves the playroom. They are coming down to this room and they learn through play. He is able to tell us all that. Normally we would ask him what he did in school today and he would say, 'Nothing, don't like it, I am not going back.'

(Parent, DEIS, Boys, Urban)

”

When children were unhappy this was inevitably connected to the challenges of coping with the intensity of the new environment as well as the 'letting go' it necessitated of core family attachments, especially to their mums. These findings might reflect the increase in hours spent at school after transition for some of the children, also possibly the enhanced need for security figures during a period of significant environmental change that going to 'big' school entails.

“

'She just found the drop offs really hard and there were certain times when I had something going on at work, that I had to drop and go which was heart-breaking for me to do. So, yeah, she settled really well. I mean you know, apart from the drop-offs in the morning, I think when (Dad) does it it's a lot easier for her, than when it's just me. So, yeah, we're still getting through it. We're not quite through it yet. We're still trying to find a way that'll work. I think the 25-minute journey in the car, she's fine when she leaves home, by the time she gets here she's really anxious.'

(Parent 2, Co-Ed, Rural)

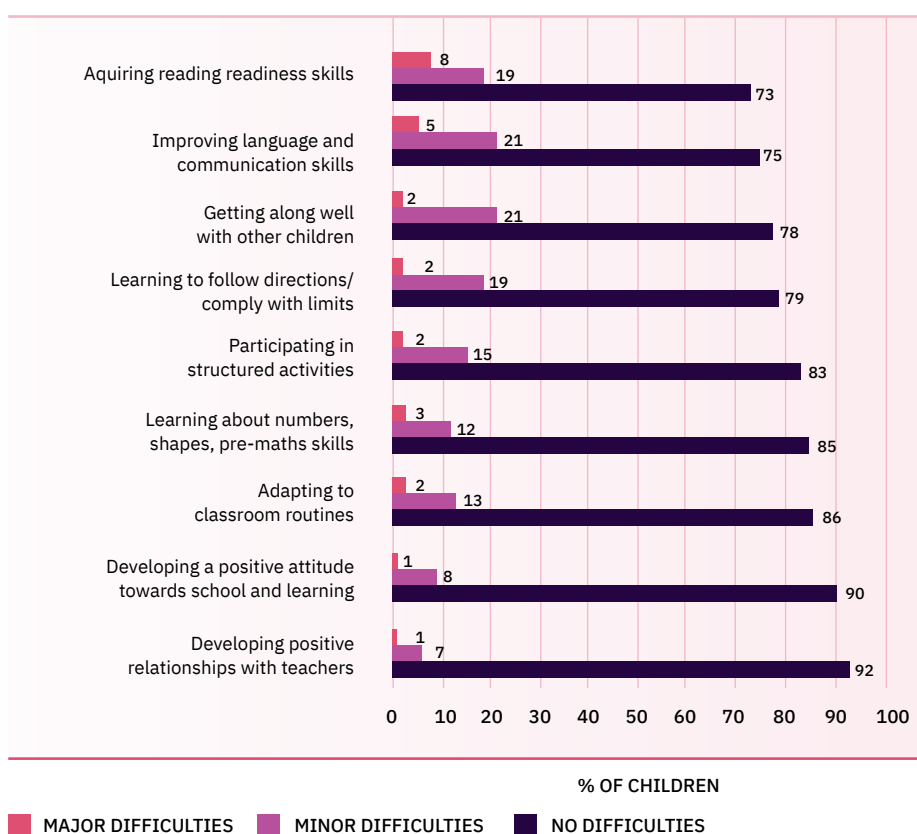
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Teacher ratings of school adjustment

Teachers rated children's adjustment to school considering nine areas of functioning (Figure 9) and indicating whether each child had no difficulties, some difficulties, or major difficulties during January to March of the Junior Infants year.

- Across all areas, the majority of children (73-92%) were reported to have no difficulties, with most children rated as having no difficulties in developing a positive relationship with their teacher (92%) and a positive attitude towards school and learning (90%).
- Areas where difficulties were reported included reading readiness skills (8% were identified as having major difficulties and 19% some difficulties) and language and communication skills (5% were identified as having major difficulties and 21% some difficulties).

Figure 9 Teacher rating of children's adjustment to school¹



¹ Some categories do not add up to exactly 100 due to rounding

A key issue that arose in the narratives of both principals and teachers was a disconnect between expectations around learning at preschool and primary level. As noted earlier, teachers appreciated the importance of early years settings in supporting positive transitions to ‘big school’ for children.

Principals and teachers in the case study schools observed that some children were entering primary school with high levels of prior learning, but that, as noted also in Figure 4, the more important skills that were needed on entry were social and emotional skills – the ability to self-manage in the classrooms:

“

‘...because you have children now who are two years in a preschool setting, so they’re coming into Junior Infants and a lot of what’s been done in the current Junior Infant class has already been done in the preschool, so there’s complete overlap, ...’

(Principal, Girls, Urban)

”

“

‘I think what would help, if they could all come in, know how to stack a chair, put on their coat, put away their lunchbox. You’d be surprised the amount that come in not knowing that... I’m not asking any child to be able to come in and read, do sounds. That’s all done in school and it should be done there’

(Teacher, Girls, Urban)

”

Conclusion

Significant work in supporting school transitions is occurring in the Irish educational context. In the First 5 Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 Implementation Plan (2019 – 2021), a key objective is to support children in their transitions to primary school. The Implementation Plan details actions necessary to improve the current provision. These include increasing information for parents about starting school; providing formal transition supports to schools including joint CPD and the NCCA's reporting templates, Mo Scéal; and clarifying the types of competencies most useful for children on starting school to early childhood settings. The activities in the DCEDIY plan build on the NCCA's summaries of the evidence around transition from preschool to primary school published in three reports in 2016.

The NCCA has contributed part of this work already, with the Mo Scéal (My Story): Moving from Preschool to Primary reporting templates for preschools and primary schools. The templates are available for primary teachers, early years educators and parents to use to document the child's competencies and any important information that should be transferred across educational settings. Children are also asked about their feelings about transition and having their information shared between schools and early childhood settings. Despite this good practice, our findings clearly show persistent challenges. Three key issues have emerged.

First, there is still much work to be done to encourage schools to share information about children and to bridge the transition in terms of curriculum and pedagogy. This also echoes the recent Chief Inspector's report (2016 – 2020) which highlighted the need for progress in the establishment of more formal engagement between preschool and primary schools to support children's transitions. The Chief Inspector's report called for more formal links to be created, for more information to be shared, and for educators across both sectors to visit each other's schools.

Second, enhancing play-based learning in primary schools is important and is also on the agenda of the First 5 Implementation Plan. This is of relevance to the observations in our report that children (and parents) viewed primary schools as places for 'work' rather than play. Of note in the findings were teacher concerns of children being 'over-prepared' in skills related to literacy and numeracy on entry to Junior Infants.

Third, teachers emphasised social and emotional competencies as being key to the facilitation of a smooth transition to primary school. Rather than literacy and numeracy being the basis of a 'shared curriculum' across the transition, social and emotional learning appears to be a more important target. Universal methods of supporting children's social and emotional learning at the pre-school to primary school transition therefore become imperative. While positive transitions are important for all children, they are especially so for children at risk, through poverty, social isolation and/or with specific learning needs. Indeed, it is how these critical transition points in children's lives are supported that can compound or mediate the risk of educational disadvantage as children progress through the educational system.

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), is designed to support curriculum continuity between preschools and primary schools with a focus on playful learning and the development of children's social and emotional competencies. In addition, the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum places greater emphasis on children's wellbeing through the dedication of increased curricular hours to directly supporting children's social, emotional, and physical development. These advances in educational provision in Ireland are targeting a clear need from the school, parent, and child community – for children's social and emotional competencies to be well supported so that children can benefit from their transition to primary school. Further work could include a universal social and emotional learning programme that acts as a 'bridging unit' across the transition, which involves both early years educators and primary school teachers in joint CPD and conversations around teaching and learning.

Although our findings highlight these clear areas for development, there was also evidence of very good communication between preschools, primary schools, and parents, with numerous transition activities and communication modes in use. The home-school bridge as identified in this study, is strong. This key finding points to the capacities of preschools and primary schools to further develop close connections with key stakeholders, that will ultimately strengthen the transition experiences of all children as they begin their primary schooling.

It takes a team....

This report was generated through the joint efforts of the CSL schools and families, fieldworkers, scientific advisory panel, and research team, whom we thank and acknowledge here. CSL is led by Dympna Devine, Jennfier Symonds, Seaneen Sloan and Gabriela Martinez Sainz, and is funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the Government of Ireland.



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Figures presented in this report are based on initial analysis and may be subject to change.

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